

In 1978 after 11 years and 31 shows at Marino, so began a new era in Galleon's history. Pioneer Hall was more centrally located than the hall at Marino and offered more facilities, a bigger stage, use of the storage sheds, bigger car park, etc.

It was a major setback when some 12 months later, we lost several of our key committee members - John Bowey among them. For a time the group's fortunes floundered to the extent that an Extraordinary General Meeting was called to discuss the possibility of disbanding the group. However, in true esprit de corps and with a few determined and dedicated people at the helm, it was decided to press on.

More black stage curtains were required and once again a major working bee took place. One team cut and measured the cloth, three sewing machines whirred non-stop, another group threaded curtain rings and yet another hung the finished products. A big day, but we were well pleased with the result.

One of the disadvantages of Pioneer Hall was the size of the venue. The huge hall with its high ceiling caused major acoustic problems. We struggled with the dilemma for a few years. We could not possibly fill the hall with regular seating. It was a bit sad to see our few rows of chairs set out in the cavernous space. We eventually hit upon the idea of doing our shows in cabaret style and inviting our patrons to bring their own drinks and nibbles. The hall had trestle tables available which, when covered by check tablecloths, looked very festive. It was very fashionable then to have lighted candles in wine bottles and these were placed on each table. Smoking was still acceptable in those days so ashtrays were also provided. How times changed, with more emphasis on health and safety, the candles and ashtrays were later removed.

Spreading the audience over the whole area of the hall also went a long way to solving our acoustic problems - the spread of people stopped the sound from bouncing around as it had done in the past.

Audiences took to the cabaret style with gusto. We even noticed an increase in the number of men attending. Another plus with this seating was that one could always jiggle their chair around to get a better view rather than being pinned in as in regular seating.

Our patrons revelled in the idea of bringing their own refreshments. They carted in huge eskies - they weren't going thirsty and the suppers were like banquets. We even had birthday cakes and fondue sets. The whole atmosphere was like one big party.

We decorated the foyer with coloured lights, tubs of greenery – mostly purloined from the bushes and shrubs surrounding the hall. In latter years as the hall suffered from neglect, the shrubbery was needed to cover the holes in the foyer walls.

We dressed our front of house staff in black and white and served complimentary sheries once the patrons had been shown to their tables. It was such of wonderful atmosphere we often had trouble persuading the audience to leave after the show finished – they were more than happy to continue the party. The only way we could shift them was to switch the fluoro lights on and kill the intimate atmosphere.

We were fortunate throughout our tenancy to have the co-operation of the Marion Council, particularly from Kevin Hodgson when he was Mayor. Kevin was one of our greatest supporters and knew first hand that the hall was freezing cold in winter and blazing hot in summer and we very soon had wall heaters and ceiling fans. Earlier on, the large bank of windows gave us major problems during matinees and also during daylight saving at the start of the evening performances. The bright light pouring in played havoc with the stage lighting, but here again the Council came to our rescue and fitted the hall with blackout curtains.

When casting plays I always hated telling someone they had not been selected for a role. There was also a possibility some people would be discouraged and leave the group. The idea was born that by writing our own plays, we could offer a role tailored to his or her ability, to whoever wanted to be in the production.

From this idea came “Dark Day at Deadhorse Saloon” and it turned out to be one of our biggest hits. We were lucky to have the Valerie McDowell dancing troupe involved and finished up with a cast of 35. For the first time in Galleon’s history we revelled in having to put out the “House Full” sign.

Later a send up of the famous Humphrey Bogart classic movie, Casablanca adopted the same formula. This evolved into another extravaganza – a bigger than Ben Hur cast and again including Valerie McDowell’s dancers showcasing their tap-dancing skills. We loved making entrances from the foyer, this time the French police arrived on a tandem bike weaving its way through the tables. In the movie Ingrid Bergman and her husband left Casablanca in Morocco by plane to the safety of Lisbon in Portugal. In our show, they had to make their way from Morocco across the sea to safety via the tandem bike – what is known as a bit of artistic license

Back then the Advertiser gave out awards known as the Oscarts for the best theatre shows of the year. For our Casablanca send up, we were thrilled to win the award for the Best Revue of 1992.

We did not pretend that our shows displayed much of what critics call ‘artistic merit’, but our frivolous shows attracted huge audiences and helped fill our much depleted coffers. This enabled us to buy more up to date lighting equipment, a huge expense for any theatre group – the globes alone for these lights cost us \$70 back in the 80’s and 90’s.

This is not to say that our shows were always light and frothy – we staged many dramas, “Johnny Belinda”, “Deathtrap”, “The Winslow Boy” and “The Dresser” among them. For the Australia Remembers programme celebrating 50 years since the end of WW11, we performed “Once there was a War”. While it did include some light-hearted moments, we concentrated on the darker human side of the conflict. When the lights came up we found many people were moved to tears showing that while we could make people laugh, we could also make them cry.

Some of our shows invited audience participation and to their credit our patrons indulged us. I remember one night we started a congo line thinking that perhaps a few people might humour us. The response was somewhat overwhelming, an ever-growing crowd congoed through the tables, and then carried away with enthusiasm, climbed the steps to the stage and congoed across the stage. A quick executive decision decided it was time to quickly move on to the next segment of the show.

While I was president of the Galleon Theatre Group I was extremely fortunate in having a wonderful committee of dedicated people. At one time the Children’s Hospital held Bingo sessions in the Pioneer Hall on Friday nights, finishing at 9pm. Committed as we were, we all assembled outside waiting for the hall to be cleared so that we could start shifting in some of the paraphernalia necessary for the performance on the next day. Time didn’t matter, even though most of us still had to face up to work the next day.

It used to take us ages to transform the rather dingy, well-used, community hall into a place of magic. Often it was necessary to wash the floors and clean the toilets just for starters – not all the hall users were as house proud as we were!

We worked our butts off but did so cheerfully. Perhaps this was aided by the fact that after the work was done, someone always produced a bottle of champagne. It was often joked that to be a member of Galleon you had to be a champers quaffer.

We were involved in many community events. I recall the Marion Council put on a street parade many years ago. We borrowed a truck (again from Hills Industries as by this time I was working for them) and decked it out with all sorts of theatrical bits and pieces, people in costume, etc. The parade finished at the Marion Sports Centre where we set up a face painting tent. As the afternoon wore on a terrific storm blew up. It became quite frightening and very chaotic, the tents began collapsing and in the scramble to pack up our gear, we were all drenched to the skin.

A few years later we attended another Council community event at the Marion Sports Ground. We set up our tent – again with the elements against us, this time with a ferocious wind blowing and almost making us airborne as we tried to hold the ends and hammer in the pegs. We set up a makeshift stage and throughout the afternoon on the hour we performed small skits. Unfortunately our temporary stage proved a bit flimsy to carry the weight of five people sitting on a park bench and mid

performance the floor gave way and two of our ladies almost disappeared from sight, much to the amusement of some small boys in the audience.

It was in 1992 when the Festival of Arts committee decided that the southern area should be included in the celebrations. It was announced that a special Southern Festival train would run from Adelaide to Noarlunga so that various performances could be staged in the grounds of the Colonnades Shopping Centre. We could never say no to any suggestions, so in true Galleon style we became part of the fun. We boarded the special Southern Fringe train at the Oaklands Park station and made quite a colourful collection of actors and dancers dressed in costume ready for the festivities. Representing the Marion Council, Mayor Colin Haines was also there resplendent in his mayoral robes.

To the bemusement of other train travellers we decided to set the mood and have drinks (yes, champers of course) and nibbles on the platform to send us on the way. The event was rather disorganised and although we had requested access to a power point, none was forthcoming, with organisers running around like headless chooks. Our dancers and singers needed music for their routines. Panic was setting in until our attractive sound operator smiled sweetly at the man in the icecream booth who then allowed us to plug into his power. Just as well we had the foresight to take several long extension cords.

At one stage we put together a travelling road show. Not altogether successful. On the way home from a show in Dublin in a rented bus, we were all merrily singing along with great gusto when we ran into a tremendous storm (we always seem to attract bad weather!). When our small bus started to list sideways, the merry singing very soon fell silent as we each contemplated an early demise.

On another occasion we were asked to provide the entertainment for a CWA Convention at the Victor Harbor Town Hall. To fill in the gaps between acts, one of our members was required to stand in front of the curtains and tell jokes until the next item was ready. Unbeknown to those of us back stage the storyteller, no doubt to calm his nerves, had smuggled in a bottle of whisky. The more he imbibed the more vulgar his jokes became until the local convenor stormed backstage and demanded we end the show. It almost amounted to being run out of town. We were greatly embarrassed and furious with the culprit, but to this day he relishes telling the story of how he cleared the Victor Harbor Town Hall. That was the end of our travelling road show!

In the 80's, the Hills Drama Festivals of one act plays were very popular and Galleon was a keen participant. Eight theatre groups were involved, with each group taking turns to host the event. We took our entries to Onkaparinga, Murray Bridge, Strathalbyn, Stirling and more local venues. We won the competition once and were awarded three best actresses awards at various times.

We had our share of disasters at Pioneer Hall. One night when we had a full house, the urinal in the men's toilet blocked up with disastrous results. Desperate measures were called for. We pinned a notice on the door of the toilet suggesting at interval time the men could avail themselves of the trees in the carpark. Fortunately after some urgent phone calls, the Council once more came to our rescue and a plumber managed to fix the problem during the second half of the show, much to everyone's relief ...in more ways than one!

A matinee of a pantomime was in full swing when a power blackout brought proceedings to a sudden stop. Fortunately the water urn in the kitchen had come to the boil ready for interval, so the cast, the crew and the patrons sipped tea and coffee and chatted amongst themselves until the power resumed some time later.

Life is a lot easier for theatre groups now with so much computerised equipment. In the early days, posters and billboards were all done by hand taking many hours of laborious effort. Programmes were typed, with lots of cutting and pasting to make things fit. Until the advent of sound effects CD's, special effects were produced manually or by the sound operator skillfully timing a tape for the exact moment. How excited we were when we purchased a double deck tape player, our sound person was ecstatic! Perhaps it was the effort involved that made us appreciate our craft all the more.

We were involved in the desperate community action trying to save our beloved Pioneer Hall and it was a sad day for us when at the end of 2001 we finally said goodbye to old girl, our home for so long. We had accumulated years of memorabilia in our storage sheds and needed to be ruthless

when disposing of it. Many items were laid out in the carpark for people to help themselves. One lady rode off with a bookcase balanced on the handlebars of her bicycle – we trust she made it home safely.

However, to all things there is a season and it seemed an appropriate time for we Galleon oldies – known affectionately as the GOFs – the Galleon Old Farts – to sip our last bottle of champagne and retire. Time to hand over to the younger generation with their new ideas and concepts, just as we had done many years ago. It is very satisfying for us to see that the new generation of Galleonites is going from strength to strength at the Marion Cultural Centre.

Sadly we have said our last good-byes to some stalwarts of our era at Galleon Theatre. Harold Webster, Barry Newlyn, Margaret Hall, John Fitzpatrick, Dulcie Thomson, Aileen Hallam and John Bowey, vale and thanks for the memories.

We loved our time at Galleon and the Pioneer Hall and still dine off the memories and laughs. Our cast parties in the old shed were legendary.

We left with the satisfaction of knowing that we helped young aspiring thespians to fulfil their dreams. Amber McMahon who started with us as an eight-year-old is now a member of the Sydney Theatre Company. Cat Lever is also Sydney based and has been offered a lead role with our own State Theatre. Rowan Yates, once a small boy who was fascinated by theatre and was always peeping around the door while we were setting up, is now stage managing for many London theatres.

One of the nicest things about belonging to a theatre group is the wide variety of ages involved. Young and old mix together with a great sense of camaraderie, all with the same aim to get the show on the road.